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Mediated Culture and the Well-informed Global Citizen

Images of Africa in the Global North

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Abstract

During recent years, considerable attention has been paid to the negative portrayal of the African continent in the media of the so-called 'global North'. Significantly less focus has been put on how to actually represent Africa in the news as more than the site of catastrophes or in other ways than through sunshine stories of the 'struggling but smiling African'. The present article argues that the lack of a wide range of different genres in the North's mediated representations of Africa is problematic, because the 'hard news' we receive is deficient in information about the background and context of news event. The article looks into different cultural expressions such as film, television entertainment and literature to explore how they can play a role in illustrating the concept of 'Africa' as both diverse and multifaceted. It argues that opening the northern mediascape to more content from the south would serve as an important backdrop and help in understanding a variety of messages from the African continent.

Keywords: media coverage of Africa, mediated culture, political economy of the media, cosmopolitan citizenship

Introduction: Limited Knowledge of Africa

The media tell us everything about how Africans die, but nothing about how they live. (Henning Mankell, *Nordic Africa Days*, Trondheim 3 October 2009)

During the spring and summer of 2009, a peculiar story of two Norwegians who were jailed and accused of murdering their Congolese driver unfolded in the Norwegian media. Joshua French and Tjostolv Moland, both in their late twenties, were charged with the murder of Abedi Kasong while travelling at night through the Congolese jungle. The two Norwegians, who claimed to be in the process of setting up a private security company in the region, had illegally found their way from Uganda to the Democratic Republic of Congo with guns and false identification cards in their luggage. The Norwegian media coverage of the court case against the two Norwegians, which took place in a military court in Kisangani, was a powerful illustration of the challenges mediated portrayals of the African continent still face in the so-called global North. Never had so many Norwegian journalists covered the Democratic Republic of Congo, and still the coverage was strikingly inadequate and derisory. The portrayals were largely in ac-

cordance with the common mediated story about the African continent: as ‘a place’ with a malfunctioning system, where crisis is normality, where people are either hateful or suffering and always in dire need of help and knowledge from outside – from the north. By portraying the African context as primitive, irresponsible, bizarre and rather frightening, the Norwegian media implicitly created sympathy for the two accused. Very little journalistic work was done at that time to put the events unfolding in the court room into a wider context, a context for which central elements could be found both in the republic of Congo’s colonial and more recent history. One example is the fact that the city is still today referred to as *la ville martyre* – the martyr city – due to the gruesome massacres it has witnessed, the last of these as late as in 2002. The highly problematic role both mercenaries and illegal traders play in destabilizing the country was not delved into either. Considerable focus was put on the obvious weaknesses of the Congolese legal system¹, but at this stage no Norwegian media questioned or investigated what the Norwegian men *really* were doing in the Congolese jungle with guns and false identification papers. On September 8, 2009, both men were found guilty of all charges and sentenced to death four and five times, respectively, by the military tribunal.

It should be mentioned that, during the period following the sentence, more investigative news stories and documentaries presenting the situation in Congo in a broader perspective were presented in the Norwegian media. However all in all, the general media coverage revealed the Norwegian journalists’ poor knowledge of the African continent per se. It seemed that the newsrooms could get away with such poor coverage and stereotypical portrayals of Africa and Africans because most Norwegians have very little knowledge about the continent and its history.

Towards a Well-informed Cosmopolitan Citizenship

Against this background, the question that emerges is what can be done to provide general audiences in the north with a broader mediated knowledge of, and hence proximity to, the African continent? During recent years, considerable thought has been given to the negative portrayal of the African continent in the media of the so-called global North (e.g., Hawk 1992; Hydén et al. 2003; Hunter-Gault 2006). Significantly less focus, however, has been put on how to actually represent Africa in the news as more than the site of catastrophes or in other ways than through sunshine stories of the ‘struggling but smiling’ African. While supporting the assertions of those who criticize the general coverage of Africa in the media in the north, the present article argues that the main problem faced by global media in relation to the coverage of the African continent today is not solely linked to *how* existent news stories about Africa are constructed. It further argues that a process of increasing northern audiences’ African media literacy and of moving in the direction of what Ulf Hannerz (2004) has called a ‘well-informed cosmopolitan citizenship’ is dependent on developments at two different levels.

The first level is related to journalistic practices in the Norwegian newsrooms as well as in the field. The newsrooms’ prioritizing of foreign news is central to increasing the quality of the news we receive. Ulf Hannerz argues, in his book *Foreign news* (2004), that foreign reporting makes us “feel at home in the world”. Being there is thus important, and as the experiences from D.R. Congo once again have illustrated, not just being there a few days as a ‘parachute journalist’, but being there with body and

soul, preferably over time (Orgeret and Simonsen 2009). The further away from one's own culture one travels to cover the world, the greater is the need to be conscious of how one portrays people and societies. There is a need to challenge the ever-increasing pressure to produce the so-called C stories in journalism: Crime, Crisis, Catastrophe and Celebrity. The last C – Celebrity – is increasing with great speed. Good examples are how Africa becomes newsworthy when Angelina Jolie's birth, Madonna's adoption, or Bono's interest in Africa is added to a story. Richey and Ponte (2010, forthcoming) refer to the latter, which is part of an advertising strategy used "to promote virtue and save savages", as "the Rock Man's burden". It is through such "reductive repetition" (Andreasson 2005) that African underdevelopment, irresponsibility and rowdiness become popularized. However, as long as journalists do not become speculating pornographers in the industry of suffering, but follow the imperatives of good journalism and ethical guidelines, African catastrophes should not necessarily be covered in a different manner than catastrophes elsewhere – according to the universal news criteria. What is seen as more problematic is the lack of a wide range of different genres in the global North's mediated representations of Africa. A central argument of the present article is that there is a need for a mediated and popular culture that can show how the concept 'Africa' is both diverse and multifaceted.

The second level, and the one that will primarily be discussed in the following, is connected to the political economy of media and culture. Discussions around the global production and dissemination of media content were particularly present in the 1970s and 1980s. As early as in 1972-1973, a UNESCO study found that there were two clear trends in the international flow of television programmes (Nordenstreng and Varis 1974). First, there was a one-way traffic from the big exporting countries to the rest of the world. And second, entertainment material dominated the flow. Many such studies focus on the phenomena of communication, domination and cultural imperialism. "It has become a truism that present information flows are marked by serious inadequacy and imbalance and that most countries are passive recipients of information disseminated by a few other countries" (Varis 1984, p. 148). Africa's dependency on imported programmes has often been explained by the continent's supposed inadequate resources or broadcasting facilities to produce better quality local programmes (e.g., Larsen 1990). Later studies found that no clear changes in the worldwide proportion of imported programming had taken place, but that there had been an increase in regional exchanges of television programmes. In the early 1990s, many African countries' imported fare consisted of over 50 to 70 percent of the television programming. These included Angola, Gabon, Mozambique, Senegal, Togo, Zimbabwe and the then Zaire (Bourgault 1995, p.106). More recent research has focused on the notion that television is at the same time globalized, regionalized, nationalized and even localized with audiences engaging at different levels of identity and interest (e.g., Sinclair 2004 and Straubhaar 2007).

Simultaneously, the creative industries are increasingly recognized as vehicles of economic growth and exports. Over the past few years, a considerable amount of quality entertainment programming has been produced on the African continent and especially in the region's 'superpower' – South Africa. In the following, a few examples of mediated culture from South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa are presented. These examples are but a few in a wide array of culture in the south that could serve as an important backdrop to transnational audiences in the north, and help in understanding the variety

of messages from the continent. To create Hannertz's 'well-informed cosmopolitan citizenship', a wide range of media content should be made available. This is dependent on developments at an institutional level in media companies' imports from abroad, and it is dependent on developments at a transnational level. As Clive Barnett argues,

Transnational media organizations and markets regulate the circulation of representations of cultural diversity in important ways, and so in turn, they have become an important site for new, transnational struggles for visibility. (2004, p. 25).

The present article takes an explorative look at the fields of television entertainment, film and literature to find examples of popular culture's creative potential within the global political economy of the media.

Soaps with a Social Dimension

Many African countries produce local television soap operas. This is popular culture with an important social dimension that may give a broader presentation of what life in Africa can be like. It is commonly argued that the commercial success of the Home Video industry in Nigeria is so great because they "tell local stories, unapologetically, on our own terms" (Bakare 2009). Lesley Cowling (2005) has shown how the South African soap operas tend to present society as non-racial, even if the characters are mostly drawn from one racial or cultural group. Diversity is often shown through the mixing of languages, which is very characteristic of South African soaps (2005: 121-122). The oldest daily television soap opera is SABC's *Egoli*, another name for Johannesburg, meaning the Place of Gold. The first episode was broadcast on M-Net in April 1992, two years before the end of apartheid, and was the first series to show different races socializing. *Egoli* was created by Franz Marx and will end with its 4689th episode in 18 seasons on Wednesday 31 March, 2010. The most watched South African soap, *Generations*, was launched in 1993 and was the first South African soap to have a black producer, Mfundi Vundla. In 2009, it is still watched by 6 million viewers or 60% of the viewing public. *Isidingo* (The Need) is a five-day-a-week soap series famous for bringing South African audiences the first televised mixed-race kiss in 1999. In June 2009, *Isidingo* attracted new interest in South Africa as the news broke that President Zuma's daughter, Gugulethu Zuma was given one of the leading roles in the daily soap. The Afrikaans soap *Sewende Laan* (Seventh Street) was introduced on SABC2 in the end of the 1990s and shows the daily life of a community living in Hillside.

Of special interest here is the South African drama series *Yizo Yizo* (The Way it is), which has been called both a drama and edutainment series. Intended to reveal the depth and complexity of the crisis facing South African schools (Barnett 2004, p. 255), *Yizo Yizo* does not offer a sunny view of the nation. The most watched South African televised series ever is hard-kicking, disputed and thought-provoking, but also promotes insight and understanding, and presents South Africa's own version of the new post-apartheid nation using television to re-articulate cultural belonging. The series shows life at a fictional Johannesburg township school, Supatsela High, and presents themes central to the lives of many young South Africans: crime, drugs, sex, rape and HIV/Aids. Whereas the Hollywood films about Africa have never focused on one of the biggest dramas touching the continent, *Yizo Yizo* focuses on HIV/Aids in order to create a dialogue and gener-

ate debate. The use of local popular music Kwaito serves as an integral element of the 'reality effect' created around the programme. René Smith (2000, pp. 31-32) sees this as a key element in both building a large youth audience and in "realizing the objective of stimulating discussion about real-world social and policy issues". *Yizo Yizo* is a good example of how serious issues can be treated in the popular culture. As Barnett reveals, *Yizo Yizo* is the only series on South African television that shows township life, a topic otherwise reserved for news and documentary series (2004, p. 260). Hence, short news headlines from South Africa about the rights of people living with HIV/Aids, statistics on violence and rape or about anti-retrovirals would probably make much more sense to audiences in the north if they had access to real-world series such as *Yizo Yizo*. Determining how audiences in the north learn about contemporary Africa is largely the prerogative of our cultural gatekeepers. Following the main argument of the present article, that access to different forms of mediated culture may enhance our understanding or at least our curiosity, the Swedish public service broadcaster SVT1 could be taken as model, as the channel began showing *Yizo Yizo* on Swedish national television in 2007. The series could serve as a good supplement to other mediated versions of Africa in the north, where frames such as 'suffering' or 'receivers of our kindness' are common (see, e.g., Eide and Orgeret 2009).

In addition to the soaps and drama series, there is a wide range of African entertainment programmes that follow transnational formats and genres, which could be of interest to wide audiences. There is a long list of reality competition and talent programmes on the African continent, and many of the formats appear earlier there than for instance in Norway. *Pop Idol* competitions have been held and broadcast across the continent from West Africa, to Ethiopia, from Egypt to South Africa. *The Apprentice Africa* first season was in 2008 and gathered 18 contestants from six African countries. There is an African version of *Big Brother Africa*, and *So you think you can dance* also exists in a South Africa version, to mention a few. This entertainment format is often considered for a national or regional audience, as cultures with roots outside the nation-state are often ignored as a possible bridge to cross-cultural understanding. However, on Norwegian television screens, it is possible to watch, for instance, *Top Model Australia* and *The Bachelor USA*. Following the present article's argument of popular culture's dynamic potential, it could be fruitful to introduce, for instance, one of the wide range of versions of African *Pop Idol* on Norwegian television. Watching the South African version of *Idol* stresses the similarities of youth across the globe, and also provides some insights into situations that are less familiar to most audiences in the north, such as when *Idol* participant Tender Mavundla openly told the viewers that she was living with HIV in the 2007 season.

The streams of popular cultural products largely follow the general global media structures. However, technological changes such as the satellite, Internet and mobile phones have indeed acted as a kind of 'Trojan horse' of media liberalization in emerging markets, and an interactive media society has grown up alongside the more traditional media society (see, e.g., Pecora, Osei-Hwere and Carlsson 2008; Orgeret and Rønning 2009). The picture of cultural products' flows is much more complex today, and much more multi-directional than Nordenstreng and Vari's 'one-way street' metaphor of the early 1970s. However, evidence from Europe and elsewhere indicates that satellite services originating outside national borders do not usually attract audience levels that

could actually threaten traditional national viewing patterns. Hence to have an impact on the cultural ecologies and increase northern audiences' receptiveness to new cultural influences, television programmes from a broader range of cultures would have to be included in the national programming schedules, as this is decisive for what most people watch.

Africa as Exotic Scenery

From a Northern perspective, Africa has often been used in films as exotic scenery, for instance in love stories, such as in the classic films *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz 1942) and *The African Queen* (John Huston 1951). In the trailer for *Casablanca*, the city of Casablanca is introduced as "the world's most dangerous city". Although it was shot in a studio in California, *Casablanca* became a "metaphorical statement about a place that was both a promised land to run to and a den of iniquity to fall from" (Dumper and Stanley 2006, p. 115). *The African Queen*, on the other hand, had a considerable amount of location filming both from Congo and Uganda, which was combined with studio scenes filmed in London. While Africa serves as a background through the way in which it creates a particular feeling and atmosphere in *Casablanca*, it is actual and distinct in the visual expressions of the panoramic scenery in *The African Queen*. Here wildlife passes in splendid, natural procession as the little steamboat, from which the film takes its name, finds its way down river on the Ulonga-Bora through tropical dangers and hazards such as swift rapids and swarms of attacking mosquitoes. Humphrey Bogart is the star of both films, together with Ingrid Bergman and Katharine Hepburn, respectively. Both these classic films use Africa as a backdrop to war, adventure and romance, whereas Africans are portrayed as little more than one-dimensional figures who sell their goods in the markets and fill up the crowded streets of Casablanca or undertake simple tasks such as lightening the captain of the *Africa Queen*'s cigar.

Also Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985), which won seven Oscars, has its main focus on Karen Blixen's (Meryl Streep) love affair with Denys Finch Hatton (Robert Redford). *Out of Africa* is an archetypal example of Africa as a stunningly beautiful and exotic background. The classic romantic scene depicting the flight in Finch Hatton's biplane over the plains of East Africa – over light blue lakes and thousands of flamingos which spread out in large circles as the small plane approaches – is unforgettable in its beauty. However, the film may be seen as reproducing colonialist narrative and has been described as "blunt nostalgia for the colonial past" of Africa (Nakai 2000, p. 127). The film's story line is not too concerned about the people who live on the continent, or in this particular case in Kenya. In the 'autobiographical fiction' novel *Out of Africa* (1937), Karen Blixen,² who lived and worked with Kenyans for 20 years at her coffee plantation, expressed her grief over the changes the European settlers had forced on Kenyans and their culture, and her compassion for their struggles to maintain identity and dignity. In Sydney Pollack's film, however, Karen Blixen is recast quite differently, as one of "the offending white settlers, forcing her will on the native people without any sensitivity to their wishes or culture" (Cooper and Descutner, 1996, p. 240). As Cooper and Descutner (1996) show, the parts of the novel that in many ways resist patriarchal and political ideas of race and gender are left out of the film, whereas the parts that remain largely reinforce patriarchy and conventional American ideologies.

Half Devil – Half Child

In some films produced in the so-called global North, African animals seem to be more interesting than the people living there, such as in *Gorillas in the Mist* (Apted 1988) or in Clint Eastwood's *White Hunter Black Heart* (1990). *White Hunter Black Heart* is the story of filmmaker John Wilson (played by Eastwood himself) who travels to Africa for his next film, but becomes obsessed with hunting elephants and totally neglects the preparations for the film. The portrayed filmmaker apparently has many traits in common with director John Huston during the making of *The African Queen*. Arguably, it is better to focus on animals than to depict Africans either as weak victims or as evil murderers. Ever since Rudyard Kipling wrote the poem 'White man's burden' in 1799 to legitimate imperialism and the colonial project, the stereotyped African as "Half devil – half child" has been a recurring theme in films about Africa. Africans are presented either as naïve child-like characters in need of help from the north, or as savage, wild and violent figures. A striking example of such static stereotyping is found in Antoine Fuqua's *Tears of the Sun* (2003), where Bruce Willis plays a professional US soldier who decides to help a Nigeria haunted by civil war as he argues, "God has already left Africa". In this film, Africa is totally reduced to a coulisse and Africans to extras within the limited repertoire of helpless victims and cruel warlords, in order to emphasize American patriotism and courage.

Another rather problematic tendency in films produced in the north is that Africa's most important stories often are told by foreigners and through actors from the same global North. In *Cry Freedom* (1987), directed by Richard Attenborough, Denzel Washington plays South African activist Steve Biko. It may be argued that, at that time, South Africa was still under apartheid rule and it would have been hard to find a suitable South African actor to play the role. However, still in the newly released (2009) film about Nelson Mandela, *Invictus* by Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman plays Madiba while Matt Damon acts as Springbok Captain Francois Pienaar. Although Freeman received Mandela's personal permission to play him, and many South Africans seem happy with that decision stressing the physical resemblance of Freeman and Mandela, some critics wonder why Eastwood could not use South African actors to tell one of the most important South African stories ever (www.mg.co.za December 8, 2009). Members of Creative Workers' Union (CWU) of South Africa said that the US actor and singer Jennifer Hudson should be prevented from playing Winnie Mdikizela-Mandela in a forthcoming film. Oupa Lebogo, general secretary of the CWU, said of Hudson's casting: "This decision must be reversed, it must be stopped now. If the matter doesn't come up for discussion, we will push for a moratorium to be placed on the film being cast in South Africa. We are being undermined, there is no respect at all." (www.mg.co.za December 8, 2009). There were also harsh criticisms, not least from South African Actors' Union (SAAU), against Joseph Sargent's (1997) film, where Sidney Poitier played Mandela in *Mandela and De Klerk*. SAAU's members felt that Mandela's story "belongs uniquely to South Africa", and they did not want any foreigners playing him (*The New York Times*, May 30, 1996). Another such example is the casting for John Boorman's (2004) *In my Country* based on Antjie Krogh's book *Country of My Skull* (1998) about the South African Truth and Reconciliation process, where the central roles were played by American actor Samuel L. Jackson and French actress Juliette Binoche.

Yet another trend in films about Africa is to include a white protagonist to tell an African story. A remarkable example is *The last king of Scotland* (Kevin Macdonald 2006) where the story of Idi Amin (played by Forest Whitaker) is told through the character of a Scottish doctor Nicholas Garrigan (James McAvoy), a person who never existed. There are several other recent examples of inclusion of white protagonists in films about Africa, such as Fernando Mereilles' *The Constant Gardener* (2005) with Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz about the pharmaceutical industry and its involvement in Africa, and *Blood Diamonds* (2006) from Sierra Leone, where the white mercenary Danny Archer (Leonardo di Caprio) and the American journalist Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly) are the protagonists. This is not only a current tendency, Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* (1987) told Steve Biko (Denzel Washington)'s story, but the newspaper editor Donald Woods (Kevin Kline) was the protagonist. Bille August's (2007) *Goodbye Bafana* is about another curious friendship – that between Nelson Mandela (Dennis Haybert) and James Gregory (Joseph Fiennes), his white prison guard. Similarly the Rwanda film *Shooting Dogs* (Caton-Jones 2005) has white main actors, and was particularly criticized by Rwandans for including a white Roman Catholic priest who risks his life to stay with the refugees at a school in Kigali. "There was never a situation, not at a school or anywhere, where a white person refused to be evacuated. That is a pure lie" Wilson Gabo, coordinator of Rwanda's Survivors Fund expressed to Reuters (April 19, 2006). Another Rwanda film *Sometimes in April* (Peck 2005) mixes Rwandan actors and the Hollywood star Debra Winger, whereas *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) has Rwandan protagonists. Even though they starred Rwandan actors, both *Hotel Rwanda* and *Sometimes in April* received criticism in Rwanda for being too 'Hollywood' in their portrayal of the gruesome carnage. Francois Ngarambe, president of the Rwandan Genocide Survivors' Association argued that "*Sometimes in April* is characterised by very serious inaccuracies and omissions which made most survivors say 'it is not our story'." (aljazeera.net 18 April 2006).

There need not be anything wrong with using Africa as a background to tell stories with a Western perspective, but the argument of the present article is that if popular culture is to make the most of its potential in terms of increasing the audiences' knowledge and understanding, there is an additional need for media producers with backgrounds and knowledge related to Africa. This would increase the possibility to overcome the focus on culture and ethnicity as markers of difference, and could further open new spaces for democratization and exchange.

Stories to Tell

There is an increasing amount of quality fiction films and documentaries being made in and about Africa. A good example of a film that proves of particular knowledge and interest in South Africa is the powerful documentary *Bigger than Barbie* (Davis, 2006). South African films *Carmen in Khayelitsha* (Dornford-May, 2005), an adaptation of Georges Bizet's opera set in a South African township, and *Tsotsi*, about a gang leader who ends up caring for a baby accidentally kidnapped during a car-jacking (Hood, 2005), have won prestigious international prizes, and are examples of African films from and about Africa, which have reached wide global audiences. "We are finding our voice," said Paul Raleigh, one of the co-producers of *Tsotsi* when they won the Academy

Award for the best foreign language film in 2006 (*Mail and Guardian*, March 6, 2006). Francophone African films also receive attention internationally through films such as Ousmane Sembene's much acclaimed *Moolaadé* (2004), which a film blogger referred to as: "this is Africa today. The performances are as close to reality as you could get" (moviessansfrontiers.blogspot.com). The provocative film *Les Saignantes* (Bekolo 2009) from Cameroun, *Bamako* from Mali (Sissako 2006) and *Daratt* ('Dry Season') from Tchad (Haroun 2005) are also good examples of the skilled work of recent African cinema, with distinct African aesthetics that reveal the span of the vast continent and that capture the aspirations of its people.

Nigeria is the second largest producer of fiction films in the world, according to a global cinema survey conducted by Unesco³, second only to India's Bollywood, while Hollywood is number three. Nigerian Nollywood films constitute a genre of their own. Mostly known for fast made, cheap video productions direct to DVD with low production costs⁴, during recent years Nollywood has produced more quality films and as a result has become increasingly popular also beyond Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora. In the UK, two television channels show Nollywood films 24/7. The Unesco survey argues that multilingualism is a key element of the Nigerian success story. English remains a prominent language, accounting for 44% of the total films, a fact that may have contributed to Nigeria's success in exporting its films. As chronicled in a documentary entitled *This is Nollywood* (Sacchi and Caputo 2007), the revolution of Nigeria's film industry enables Africans with few resources to tell African stories. African film has emerged strongly "at a crucial time in the history of Africa, not only as a voice of the people, but also as an answer to the drudgery of a socio-economic existence characterised by high unemployment and contracting opportunities" (Ogunleye 2003). In addition to telling new stories, empowering the marginalized and being a medium for local creative expression, the African film industry now reaches increasingly larger audiences also outside the continent. This is a positive development in that it gives global audiences living images of the African continent as more than merely background. It feeds into a process in which a wide array of media representations may enlarge the mediated image of 'Africa'.

The Human Dimension

Popular culture has great potential to reach the world. An example is how the stories of Botswana's first private lady detective Mma Ramotswe have become worldwide bestsellers since the first novel was published in 1998. The fact that the books are written by a white middle aged Scottish author was met with considerable scepticism at first, but most critics agreed that he presented a refreshingly new character. Furthermore, the author Alexander McCall Smith grew up in Rhodesia and has lived many years in Swaziland and Botswana, and this has truly given him closeness to the continent and the people he portrays. In her charming and direct way, the traditionally built Mma Ramotswe personifies a spectre of nuances of an African life that is difficult to find in the general media coverage of Africa that reaches the north. The books about Mma Ramotswe, her strict secretary Grace Makutsi and Mr J.L.B Matekoni "the finest mechanic in Botswana", provide the reader with knowledge of some of the traditional values of Botswana. It is 'light' literature, but has considerable weight in the way in which it counteracts general mediated versions of Africa as being a dark continent of immorality and crisis. In the

seventh of the nine books in the series, Mma Ramotswe puts it this way in her straightforward manner:

If only more people knew that there was more to Africa than all the problems they saw. They could love us too, as we love them. (McCall Smith 2006, p. 125)

Mma Ramotswe does not want Africa to change:

She did not want her people to become like everybody else, soulless, selfish, forgetful of what it means to be an African, or, worse still, ashamed of Africa. She would not be anything but an African, never, even if somebody came up to her and said “Here is a pill, the very latest thing. Take it and it will make you into an American.” She would say no. “Never. No thank you.” (McCall Smith 1998, p. 215).

Another example of how literature can provide important context and wider perspectives is Petina Gappah’s (2009) selection of short stories *An Elegy for Easterly*. It is contemporary Zimbabwe that constitutes the backdrop for the thirteen short stories. Just as, for instance, Chenjerai Hove and Charles Mungoshi provided perspectives on the Harare and Zimbabwe of the 1990s in books such as *Shebeen Tales: Messages from Harare* and *Walking Still*, Petina Gappah presents lives and destinies in Harare and ‘Mugabeland’ in the current decade. Gappah places the personalities at the forefront of her stories, while the political and social situation is used as background. The short story, which carries the name of the book, describes Operation Murambatsvina. Murambatsvina was officially translated to ‘operation clean-up’, but the more literal translation is ‘getting rid of the filth’. The operation in which 700.000 of the poorest people in Harare lost their homes in 2005 is used as a backdrop to a story about unwanted childlessness.

Gappah has the ability to balance bitter-sharp humour with empathy without becoming too sentimental. This balancing act is combined with a very special eye for details. She writes about lived lives, adaptability, stubbornness, anger, bitterness, love and compliance. The personalities stand out as authentic and credible, filled with love for the country they miss, both those who are in exile and many of those who are still in Zimbabwe. Humour is used therapeutically. The worse the situation, the more jokes are told:

‘Before the President was elected, the Zimbabwe ruins were a pre-historic monument in Masvingo province. Now the Zimbabwe ruins extend to the whole country’ (2009, p. 33).

In such a way, many of the short stories depict a situation where life appears to be “no more than the punchline to a cosmic joke played by a particular mordant being” (2009, p. 114). Sometimes the laughter is especially acrid and worse than any crying, such as the laughter of the mother who waits for the plane at the airport in *Something nice from London*. The plane from London, which carries the dead body of her son.

Through a spectre of different voices, the stories of today’s Zimbabwe are told. Zimbabwe, which became the country with the world’s poorest billionaires. There are stories about children who have never seen coins, which ceased to exist in 2000. About BaToby, who would have loved to teach children history, about the wonders of Uthman dan Fodio’s Caliphate of Sokoto and Tshaka’s horseshoe battle formation, but who has

to repair broken-down cars for a living. Or the geography teacher who realizes that the pupils' only interest in his subject is knowledge of the exact distance to London, to Johannesburg, to Gaborone. There are stories about a dancing coffin maker. About the queues at the petrol stations, where you are allowed to come forth if you can prove that you are burying a family member. And about those who mix urine into the petrol. About the *zhing-zhong* products from China. About dark nights without any electricity. About manmade hunger. About the wives of the cabinet ministers who fly back and forth between Harare and Johannesburg to do their grocery shopping, even as their husbands promise to end food shortages. About 'the big disease with the little name... that nobody dies of'. About corruption. About the Zimbabwean diaspora, which stretches out worldwide.

Gappah introduces her book by stating that the stories are works of fiction and that "references to real people, events, places, establishment and organisations are used fictitiously". In the stories, it is especially the Governor of the Central Bank who receives harsh criticism, together with the President and the President's second wife with the enormous hats:

She wore hats of flying-saucer dimensions while cows sacrificed their lives so she could wear pair upon pair of Ferragamo shoes. 'If only I could', she said to the nation's orphans, 'I would really, really adopt you all'. (2009, p. 17).

The ruthless elite's enormous greed is a theme that is repeated in several of the short stories. "This is the new Zimbabwe where everyone is a criminal" says the protagonist of *Midnight at the Hotel California*. He continues:

I have bought and resold computers that the President donated to rural school children in Chipinge during the last election campaign – they don't need them there after all, their schools have no electricity. (2009, p. 259)

Through these stories, where the tragic and the comic walk hand in hand, *An Elegy for Easterly* offers truths from a country in which "truth can be spoken only in the private chambers of the mind". It is a book about a brutal and paradoxical Zimbabwe and about people there who fight their way forward in 'the business of living'. *An Elegy for Easterly* manages what media in general often not are able to – to give the human dimension to what is happening in contemporary Zimbabwe.

The Political Economy of Publishing

Both *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* and *An Elegy for Easterly* have been discharged into the political economy of global culture. The stories about Mma Ramotswe have been sold in over 20 million copies in English worldwide, been translated into 45 other languages and have been turned into a HBO-BBC television series as well as a BBC Radio 4 series. Gappah's short stories were published at the UK publishing house Faber and were, after just a few months, translated to at least six other languages. Through which channels the African stories are mediated is core to discussions about the political economy of culture that examine the production and distribution of the stories. Nigerian independent publisher Muhtar Bakare (2009) describes book publishing in Africa as 'a colonial legacy with which the legateses have not yet come to terms'. Taking Nigeria as

an example, he explains how 46 years after independence from Britain, the industry is still mainly licensed from British publishers and concentrates almost exclusively on the production of textbooks. Bakare asks rhetorically whether the difficulty in publication within Africa means that we will only learn about contemporary African experiences as the transnational companies mediate them?

In 1969, John Nottingham, publishing director of the East African Publishing House in Nairobi wrote:

It is I believe, profoundly important for development and the process of decolonization that an indigenous publishing industry should be established in independent Africa. It is also going to be extremely difficult [...] Books are still probably the most effective single instrument for the purveying of ideas in the developing countries; and we cannot accept that these ideas must all originate in London, New York, Paris or Brussels. Secondly, on economic grounds. There is no technological reason why all the [...] books should not be written, edited, designed, printed and published in Africa rather than in London, Malta, Paris or Hong Kong. [...] Thirdly, there are incalculable cultural advantages (1969, p. 139).

Nottingham is not too positive about a bright future for African publishing, however:

...publishing is not really very different from any other industry [...] Western economic imperialism is a far more subtle and slippery animal than his political brother. It will do anything, compromise any principles, as long as it can still see something somewhere in it for itself. (1969, p. 139).

Within the contemporary world of publishing, two main developments are notable at the same time. First, there is an important tendency towards concentration, where large companies swallow smaller ones and where power often follows a somewhat imperialist reasoning quite similar to the one Nottingham feared some forty years ago. But there is also a tendency towards fragmentation of the publishing field, as small, specialized publishing houses try to cover specific niches. A poignant example of the latter is how Muhtar Bakare's own independent publishing house Kachifo was the first to publish an affordable Nigerian edition of the now world famous Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel is now part of the official curriculum in Nigerian schools, by many considered a national heritage, and may represent an 'incalculable cultural advantage', such as that to which Nottingham refers.

Popular Culture's Dynamic Potential in the Global Media Industry

The new communication technologies imply that audiences can more easily decide what information and entertainment they consume. As such, the so-called new media provide an enormous potential for gaining access to voices other than those we find in the mainstream media. There are more chances than ever to be part of the world, to learn about Africa, also in the global North. However, it seems that most audiences stick to their local media even if the opportunities to connect to the world are highly present. Hence the main responsibility for introducing the world to the audiences still largely lies with the national media institutions in terms of what music they play, which films they import and what entertainment programmes they mix into their programming schedules. The present

conclusion is that general media literacy about Africa is necessary in order to create more attentive and critical audiences that are able to challenge overly one-dimensional portrayal of the continent. The article has argued that a central problem in relation to the coverage of Africa in northern media is the angles and perspectives that are not represented in the media in the north. As a result, the impression we get of the African continent is highly one-dimensional. We need more stories from Africa, stories from the entire spectre of media formats and genres. More nuanced journalism, but also more popular culture, art and entertainment, reality and soaps that may increase our repertoire of famous Africans to include more people than Nelson Mandela and Youssou N'Dour. The relationship between the media and the real world is never one-to-one, and the more multifaceted and nuanced the stories we receive are, the more realistic our impressions will be. A wide spectre of media representations would take the mediated image of Africa closer to the wide and complex original. The importance of challenges such as eradicating poverty will be clearer in a context where human beings are represented as individuals, and not as suffering stereotypes. Hence, there is a need for Western media producers with a background in and understanding and knowledge of Africa. Journalists who know that the Mopane larvae is considered a delicacy in Southern Africa and do not think that the Zimbabweans eat them because they are starving to death, as an American journalist who had managed to get into the country recently reported home. But most of all, there is a need to open the northern doors to African media and cultural products that draw upon the various and increasingly globalized cultural literacies of citizens. As Ulf Hannerz argues:

Ethnonationalism does not have a monopoly on central, deeply affecting experiences; for a probably growing number of people, personal bordercrossing involvements with different places, cultures and nations, may well have such qualities (2004, p. 22).

Popular culture can give people the first push towards becoming more engaged global citizens. The present article has given examples of some of the deeply embedded cultural logics and of the political economy of culture and popular culture, but also of the enormous amount of material there is – cultural products that have the potential to serve as a lever to pique people's curiosity and perhaps also encourage their wider civic responsibility and will to engage in issues of relevance to the world. Exposure to culture, as in the examples given here, may increase northern viewers' awareness of the fact that African countries are much more complex than what is commonly believed. The present article has argued that there is a need for media content that shows that the concept 'south' is full of contradictory meanings, meanings that do not create the feeling that Africa is another planet.

Notes

1. These weaknesses were more than obvious when the council for the prosecution demanded a death sentence times five for the two in addition to 3000 billion NOK – around 350 billion Euros (two zeros were later removed from this amount) in damages from the Norwegian state.
2. The 1937 edition of *Out of Africa* was published in Danish and English in her name, Karen Blixen. The 1938 American edition was published under the pseudonym of Isak Dinesen, like most of her publications written in English.
3. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=45317&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

4. A typical Nollywood film is filmed on location and not in a studio, and costs around 15. 000 US dollars. As a comparison, a Bollywood film costs one million dollars and an US made film will cost 25 million US dollars on average.

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